

The Great Riddle

Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald

by Edward Jay Epstein.

Reader's Digest Press/McGraw-Hill,
382 pp., \$12.95

Andrew Hacker

"Who killed Kennedy?" is a riddle that won't go away. Most Americans still doubt the official explanation, that Lee Harvey Oswald did it all unaided. Nor have criticisms come only from eccentrics. John Connally, for example, contradicted the Warren Commission in insisting that he and the president were hit by different bullets.

Indeed, details of that sort make up the assassination writ. The 888-page *Report* is only the beginning. After that come the fifteen volumes of hearings (7,907 pages) and eleven volumes of exhibits (another 9,832 pages). A further store of materials can now be viewed at the National Archives. There is a mass of interpretative literature, with authors ranging from Dick Gregory and Gerald Ford to the Coroner of Allegheny County. To follow the debate requires familiarity with an endless litany of names (Billy Lovelady, Candy Barr, Carlos Bringuier); places (Oak Cliff, Stemmons Freeway, the Texas Theater); and theories ("Single Bullet," "Grassy Knoll," "Two Oswalds"). Speculations have included Cuban connections, a Mafia involvement, and—now—a mission beginning in Moscow.

What we need is someone we can trust, to guide us through this overgrown trail. Edward Jay Epstein would seem ideally suited for this job. He is one of our best national reporters, whose work has always been based on solid factual grounds. His book *Inquest*, still the best single study of the assassination, focused on the Warren Commission and the constraints under which it operated. His *Agency of Fear*, on Nixon's attempt to create a personal police force, again showed Epstein's mastery at discovering important material and inducing people to talk. That he was devoting his next book to Oswald was welcome news. Moreover, with an abundant advance from his publisher he and a staff of helpers conducted over 400 interviews, many with people never approached by the Warren Commission. For example, they tracked down sixty-two men who had served with Oswald in the Marines almost

twenty years ago.

Legend is a very curious book. This said, let me add that it is utterly absorbing. It is a saga of fits and starts, essentially the life of a loner. Yet under Epstein's rendering this morose young man becomes increasingly interesting. Epstein tells of an adolescent year in the Bronx, where Oswald was picked up for truancy at the Zoo. ("Tense, withdrawn, and evasive," wrote Dr. Renatus Hartogs, then a staff psychiatrist.) Of his discovery of sex in Minsk. And of a talk to Jesuit seminarians in Mobile, who thought he was "at least" a college graduate. At the end we feel we know Oswald better, yet remain as perplexed as ever. Perhaps this was Epstein's intention.

It is a fascinating book. There were times when I felt like hurling it across the room, yet knew I would immediately rush to retrieve it. Perhaps that, too, was Epstein's plan. One way to describe the sensation is to say that reading *Legend* is like laboring over a jigsaw

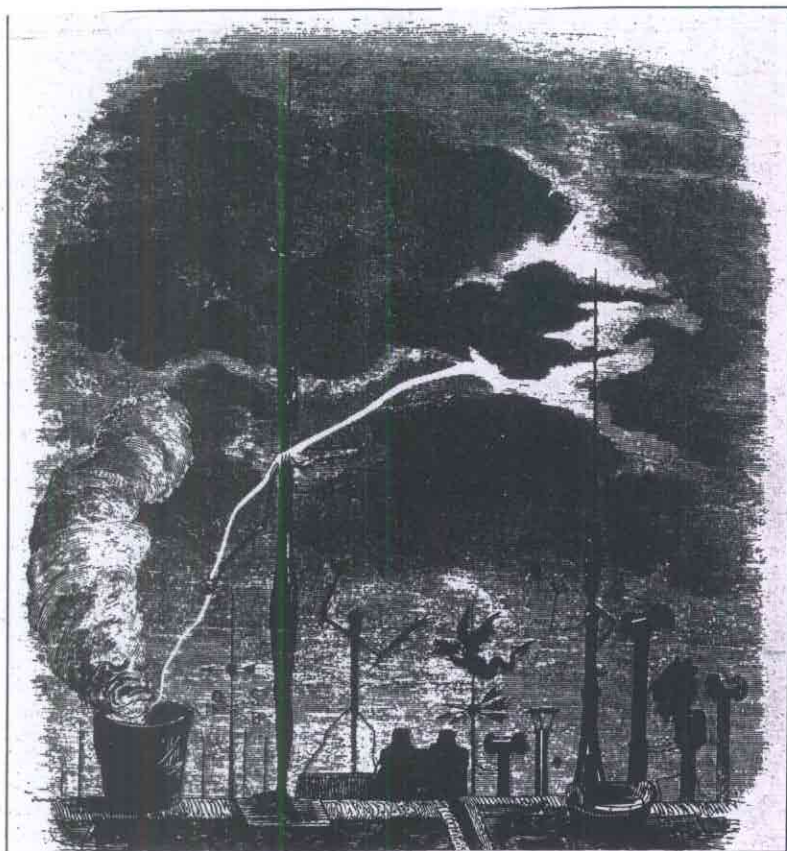
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puzzle and then discovering many key pieces are missing. And to make matters worse, included in the box are pieces from several other puzzles.

Thus, while the core of the book is about Oswald, Epstein devotes the opening and closing chapters to tensions inside American intelligence agencies. As a result *Legend* closes not with a last word on Oswald, but with the CIA in turmoil.

Epstein has one thesis, which he sustains throughout the book. It is that Oswald entered the Soviet Union intending to give his hosts military information; that he received training as a spy while resident in Minsk; and that on his return to the United States he carried out espionage assignments for the Russians. Yet at no point does Epstein seek



to show a link between these activities and Oswald's role in the assassination.

Indeed, *Legend* is conspicuously agnostic about what Oswald may or may not have been doing during some crucial midday seconds on November 22, 1963. Having committed himself on Oswald's "secret life" as a spy, Epstein seems to be asking his readers to solve the rest of the puzzle for themselves. Nor will they be aided by a six-page appendix entitled "The Status of the Evidence." Even Epstein's skills cannot compress all the controversies into that space.

Finally, after *Legend* was already on its way to the bookstores, Epstein gave an interview to *New York* magazine, where he spoke precisely about some matters which had been left ambiguous in the book.¹ A paperback edition would be well advised to include that interview as an appendix, even referring to it at appropriate places in the text.

A legend is an operational plan for a cover," according to one CIA official. "A legend is a false biography," ac-

¹The interview appeared in the issues of February 27 and March 6, 1978, and was conducted by Susana Duncan. All quotations here will be from the second part of the interview.

cording to a KGB counterpart. The "legend" created for Lee Harvey Oswald is in fact the story most of us have been believing. This is that he was a withdrawn and mixed-up young man, given to half-baked political opinions, and certainly not someone to be trusted with an earth-shattering assignment. Indeed, this was the version the Warren Commission promulgated. To be sure, that two-and-a-half year Soviet sojourn could raise embarrassing suspicions about the leading assassination suspect. But not if we accepted the "legend" that Oswald spent his days as a "checker" at a television factory in Minsk and his nights going out with girls. Moreover, according to the "legend," his later forays into Cuban politics simply show how mercurial he was.

Epstein proposes that all this was a cleverly fabricated cover. In fact, he

says, Oswald had committed himself to the Soviet Union even while a teen-age Marine. Stationed at a radar base in Japan, he had access to "classified information pertaining to almost all aspects of the Air Defense Identification Zone in the Pacific." So of course did other leathernecks. But while they were carousing with local bargirls, Oswald had mysterious meetings with an "attractive Eurasian woman." ("Much too good-looking for Bugs," recalled an envious barracks mate.) Back in California for his final months in the service, there were more unexplained liaisons. ("A heated discussion with a man in a top-coat.") Six weeks after leaving the Marines, and three days before his twentieth birthday, he crossed into the Soviet Union via the Finland Station.

As is well known, he went immediately to the American Embassy in Moscow, where he made a big fuss about wishing to renounce his citizenship. After that he was sent to Minsk as a semi-skilled factory laborer. Epstein finds the story that he worked as a "checker" flimsy. For one thing, Oswald was given a sumptuous riverside apartment, the kind ordinarily reserved for officials. In addition, he got a handsome supplement to his salary from the Soviet "Red Cross." More pointedly, *Legend* provides a map of central Minsk, showing two training

schools for spies just a short stroll from Oswald's doorstep. In his *New York* interview, Epstein alludes to "the true nature of his activities in Russia." By this he means Oswald was being trained in espionage.

The book also suggests that Oswald was thoroughly questioned by the Russians about the military secrets he knew. And it was at that time that they finally hit a U-2. As it happened, some of those U-2 overflights originated at the Japanese base where Oswald had been stationed. From his radar experience he could have deduced the U-2's precise altitude, the figure the Soviets needed to bring Gary Powers down. In an age of elaborate equipment, one well-situated serviceman can recall a fugitive fact that unlocks an entire system.

After about a year and a half of defection, Oswald began putting it about that he was disillusioned. So he wrote our Moscow embassy saying he

wanted to come home. That was of course another prearranged chapter in the "legend" of a mixed-up kid. Just to add to the confusion, the next month he told a member of a visiting University of Michigan band that he "despised the United States and hoped to spend the rest of his life in Minsk." About a year later, he wrote his brother saying, "I really don't want to leave until the beginning of fall, since spring and summer here are so nice."

Yet in less than two months, he and Marina and their daughter were en route to the United States. Even the CIA swallowed the "legend." "The CIA did not debrief him," William Colby told Dan Rather and Les Midgeley in a 1976 CBS interview. "We had no contact with Oswald before he went to the Soviet Union, and no contact after he returned." Not even to ask him about barge traffic on the Svslach River that flowed in front of his window.

In October of 1962, four months after his return, Oswald decided it was time to start spying. He allowed the Texas Employment Commission to send him to Jaggars-Chiles-Stovall, a Dallas typesetting firm, where he was hired as a "photo-print trainee." This company was a CIA-subcontractor, printing Cuban, Chinese, and Soviet place names for affixing to overflight maps. Even though the maps themselves never left Langley, simply having the names would indicate regions in which American intelligence had an interest. In his *New York* interview, Epstein says that Oswald's espionage probably consisted of copying lists of names and passing them on to the Russians. And in *Legend* he recalls that Oswald wrote the word "micro-dot" in his address book next to the name of the company. Just what one would expect from a spy with a goofy-kid cover. After all, goofy kids like to play that they are spies.

But Epstein has another account to unfold, which he reserves for a prologue and epilogue. Much of this material comes from a declassified FBI report, now available in the National Archives. But the ultimate interpretation stems from interviews with former CIA officials, in particular James Jesus Angleton.

Two months after the assassination, one Yuri Ivanovich Nosenko, an officer of the KGB, handed himself over to the CIA, claiming to be a defector. As an earnest of his sincerity, he turned in the name of an American sergeant who had been acting as a Soviet informant. Of

course, Nosenko might still be Moscow's man, sent to give us "disinformation." So he was kept in a small, secluded room for three years while questioners pummeled him for loopholes and inconsistencies. Apparently he never cracked. Nosenko is now living in North Carolina, on the CIA's payroll as a "consultant."

Nosenko did indeed come with a "message from Moscow," as Epstein titles this prologue. One of his KGB duties, he said, was supervising their file on Oswald. So he was in a position to clarify any doubts about that ex-Marine's activities in Russia. Shortly after the young man's arrival, "it was decided that Oswald was of no interest whatsoever." He was "unstable...and of little importance." So he was sent to Minsk to work in a television factory. Such knowledge as he had about radar or U-2 altitudes was deemed not worth eliciting: "Oswald was never asked for any information about the American military." And when the lad showed signs of homesickness, he was allowed to leave with his wife and daughter.

We are not told what other intelligence Nosenko had to impart. He had come mainly to assure us about Oswald. And the burden of that unburdening was that Oswald was a naïve idealist who had become just a bit of a nuisance.

According to Angleton—and Epstein—Nosenko's story was a patent concoction. Moreover, if the Soviets sent over a man of such caliber as to stand up to three years of questioning, then the stakes must be pretty important. "The Soviets were going to great lengths to contrive a legend about Oswald's residence in the Soviet Union," Epstein writes in *Legend*. And they hoped "to conceal the reason for his return to the United States," he adds in his *New York* interview.

It is easy to understand that the last thing the Russians would want would be to have the chief Kennedy suspect revealed as one of their agents. That's

the way wars can start. Sending over Nosenko seems obviously a long shot. His story seemed just too convenient, and would hardly persuade people such as Angleton. But then again the Warren Commission wanted an equally innocuous version of Oswald's stay in the Soviet Union. Epstein points out that Commission staff members knew of Nosenko's arrival and that he was volunteering information about Oswald. However the Commission never interviewed him. While his story squared with the Commission's predilections, once he was before a stenographer there was no telling where his testimony might lead. Some witnesses are too hot to handle.

All the while, internecine warfare was brewing in the CIA, between those who saw Nosenko as a legend-bearer and those desiring to take him seriously. Interlaced with all this was the usual bad blood with the FBI, which had its own in-house Russian. Epstein allows Angleton's recollections to wander far afield from Oswald. Among these is the suspicion that the Russians have a "mole" well up in the CIA. They managed it

The Nosenko episode was mentioned by Daniel Schorr in his article "The Assassins," which appeared in these pages: *NYR*, October 13, 1977, pp. 14-22. Schorr focuses on various CIA plots to kill Castro and Cuba's reactions to them. This raises the possibility of Oswald as a self-anointed avenger, a point I take up later.

with both British and West German intelligence. So why not in Langley, Virginia, as well?

This is plainly a matter of moment, so it may seem gratuitous to complain both that it upsets the balance of a book and that we should know more about the arguments of those in the CIA who disagree with Angleton. By devoting an epilogue to a tangential topic Epstein deprives *Legend* of the ending it deserves. I am not suggesting that he provide us with answers to all the questions that have plagued us. In most of these matters hard evidence simply isn't available. At the same time, Epstein has sifted enough material to weigh what we know against what we don't know, and from there to say why we can or can't draw conclusions. Yet apart from the thesis that Oswald was trained and acted as a spy, he is remarkably noncommittal.

Take, for example, the question of whether relationships Oswald had with other people can be linked to the assassination. On the whole issue of whether Oswald had a "Cuban Connection"—another chapter heading—Epstein gives us most of the pieces but abstains from putting them together. Thus, the "Hands Off Cuba!" flyer Oswald distributed in New Orleans had the address of an anti-Castro group printed on it. Shortly before the assassination, he is said to have appeared in the company of some anti-Castro Cubans, one of whom took pains to describe him as an "expert shot." The Cubans also talked of assassinating Kennedy and overthrowing Castro, according to the testimony of Sylvia Odio, the woman they visited. Yet Oswald also took a trip to the Cuban consulate in Mexico City, where he reportedly told an official that he was "a friend of Cuba" and that "somebody ought to shoot that President Kennedy...maybe I'll do it." Of course Oswald may have been dragging assorted Cuban herrings across a careful trail. But the reader is entitled to have some assessment from

Epstein on the evidence for these conflicting connections and what it amounts to.

Or on the firing at General Edwin Walker, in which Oswald probably participated. A friend of Walker's, passing by the general's house a few days prior to the shooting, said he saw two men scouting the place. And on the night of the attempt, a next-door neighbor said he glimpsed at least two men racing away in different cars. (As Oswald, according to most witnesses, could not drive, he would have had to be along as a passenger.) Even now, we haven't the faintest idea who these associates might have been. And if Oswald needed help with Walker, would he be left wholly on his own with Kennedy? Here, too, we need guidance.

Then there is the mysterious George De Mohrenschildt, who warrants a book all to himself. A White Russian émigré based in Dallas, he lavished much more attention on Oswald than one would ordinarily expect. After one of his interviews with Epstein he was found dead, an apparent suicide. Epstein calls his chapter on De Mohrenschildt "The Handler," to convey that Oswald was under his direction. In the *New York* interview, Epstein surmises that the older man was supervising the younger "for some intelligence agency." De Mohrenschildt seems to have been one of those elegant freelance agents left over from Eric Ambler days. Colby said the CIA

never interviewed Oswald; perhaps it contracted the job to De Mohrenschildt. Yet if Oswald was already with the KGB, was he also moonlighting for De Mohrenschildt? Still, the important question is whether their relationship had any tie to the killing of Kennedy. Epstein gives no help here either.

But the question on which many of us really want aid is whether anyone other than Oswald was firing in Dealey Plaza. And here *Legend* ascends to what must be the ultimate agnosticism. The chapter "Day of the Assassin" (in the singular) begins with the words, "Oswald arose early in the morning." Over the next page and a half, sentences read as one might expect, "Oswald walked...." "Oswald explained...." "Oswald remained...."

But then, on page 243, as the motorcade passes the depository, "Oswald" disappears from the sentences. Instead we find ourselves reading, "A rifle shot echoed....," "there was another shattering sound....," "a third shot exploded...."

After that, Epstein reverts to his original syntax: "Oswald coolly made his way out of the building....," "Oswald caught a bus....," "Oswald put on his gray zippered jacket and took from the closet his snub-nosed Smith & Wesson revolver."

So who fired on Kennedy? Not necessarily the man so thoroughly studied in *Legend*. In a six-page appendix on "The Status of the Evidence," Epstein offers his judgments on the issues which have made for so much debate. For instance, he concludes that all three shots must have come from a depository window. Yet even here he refrains from naming Oswald, alluding instead to "a sniper or snipers."

Epstein is obviously familiar with all of the controversies over bullet weights, entry wounds, and which witnesses claimed where the firing came from. But the very terseness of this section on the evidence suggests that he has wearied of the arguments. Yet even at this date there are readers who need to be told why the theory that one bullet hit both Kennedy and Connally has stirred so much dispute. Reviewing these and other issues would have required an appendix of at least fifty pages, or another book within a book.

Still, some technical questions are important. Most analyses agree that all the

shooting occurred within 5.6 seconds, a time calculated from the speed of a movie camera that filmed the assassination. (Epstein adds another 1.4 seconds, suggesting that the opportunity to begin firing came earlier if one aimed through the branches of a tree.)³ We are dealing with a moving target, traveling approximately 140 to 190 feet from the depository window during the seconds the shooting took place. Two (or three) solid hits on passengers in a car at least 140 feet away in 5.6 (or 7.0) seconds is an amazing accomplishment. Expert marksmen recruited by both the Warren Commission and CBS were hard pressed to duplicate this feat, and none did so on his first try. Yet we are asked to believe—although not necessarily by Epstein—that in a third the time it takes to

³Epstein says that by November the oak would no longer have its leaves. While I want to stay away from this kind of detail, the Associated Press photograph at the top of p. 93 of Volume 18 of the Warren Commission *Exhibits* shows that tree in full foliage. Perhaps autumn comes later in Dallas.

—read this sentence aloud, Lee Harvey Oswald fired, worked a hand bolt, fired again, again worked a hand bolt, and fired once more, all the time maintaining a reasonably accurate sight on a car that was moving away from him.

Oswald got only middling scores on the Marine rifle range and that had been a half-dozen years earlier. There are no indications that he was good with guns, despite a boyhood in both Texas and the Bronx. If he was the one who aimed at General Walker, he missed an easy sitting target. Epstein records a remark of Nosenko's, about some hunting excursions near Minsk. "Fellow hunters observed that Oswald was such a poor shot that they often had to give him some of their game so that he would not return empty-handed." Of course this could be pure fiction, part of the KGB "legend." Still, we have no convincing evidence that Oswald practiced with his \$19.95 mail-order rifle, let alone at a moving target at distances up to 190 feet.

We are dealing with probabilities,

OSWALD'S MARXISM: THE MAASDAM MANIFESTO

Written en route back to the United States, June 4-13, 1962

I have often wondered why it is that the communist, capitalist and even the fascist and anarchist elements in America, allways profess patriotism towards the land and the people, if not the government; although their movements must surly lead to the bitter destruction of all and everything.

To where can I turn? to factional mutants of both systems, to odd-ball Hegelian idealists out of touch with reality religious groups, to revisionist or too absderd anarchism. No!

Automation may be compared to the run away robot who displays so many falicities that it is obvious it is run away. rather it is the much more sutle aspects of Industrialization and mechnicization which brings the greatest hardships upon the people a general decay of classes into shapless sociaties without real cultural foundations, regementation, no so much of people since industrialization actively provides for more free movment of classes around each other, but rather of ideals although those regemented ideals have more freedom of expression throughout all the classes.

as history has shown time again the state remains and grows whereas true democracy can be practiced only at the local level, while the centralized state, administrative, political or supervisual remains their can be no real democracy a loose confederation of communitys at a national level with out any centralized state what so ever.

From: Warren Commission, *Exhibits*, Vol. 16, pp. 106-116

which means even freak occurences are possible. Perhaps things would be clearer if we were told that given the total array of circumstances, a marksman with Lee Harvey Oswald's background stood, say, a one-in-3,500 chance of doing all that damage by himself. Simply knowing the odds would make the inconceivable at least slightly believable. To my knowledge, no one has worked up such a calculation.

A Warren Commission memorandum pondered the very idea Epstein is proposing. Was Oswald, it wondered, "the kind of man who could successfully have lived out such a legend?" The issue here is character. We are asked to see this young man, not yet in his middle twenties, as so accomplished an actor that all his overt activities were a purposeful cover for spying. Required here would be an extraordinary courage, discipline, calculation. This is not exactly the Oswald we have come to know through *Legend*.

Furthermore, Oswald handed out pro-Castro pamphlets, subscribed to communist and Trotskyite publications, sent a threatening letter to the FBI, and wrote to the Russian Embassy through

the US mails—if someone wanted to nominate himself for surveillance in the early 1960s, it is hard to think of a better plan. We now know that the FBI had started a file on him, as an "open security case." Perhaps the Soviets were trying him out as a new experiment in espionage, on the order of the purloined letter. In this the FBI could be counted on to help: for they lumped him with campus and streetcorner activists, whose files are presumably kept separate from those of agents who actually steal secrets.

Yet if Oswald had perfected so ultra-sophisticated a cover, how did he get involved in the shooting of Kennedy? Epstein told *New York* he doesn't believe the assassination was a Soviet assignment: "The fact that Oswald traces so clearly back to the Russians makes it extremely unlikely that they would have recruited him as an assassin." It could be argued that he was induced to the scene of the crime by Cubans of one stripe or another. If that happened, it suggests he wasn't very smart. If noth-

ing else, there were no signs of plans for a getaway. Unless one counts strolling seven blocks and boarding a passing bus.

The "kind of man" Oswald was can be clarified by looking at his politics. Epstein uses a double approach. The Marxism Oswald espoused while in the Marines is seen as the ideology one would expect from a person soon to defect to the Soviet Union. However the Marxism he uses after his return is tailored to the image he wishes to maintain. Thus a seventeen-page manifesto Oswald wrote coming home on the ship *Maasdam* is seen by Epstein as preparing a cover as someone repelled by the betrayal of socialism in Russia. However after reading those rambling pages, I am persuaded they are a genuine article. Genuine, that is, after Oswald's fashion.

Oswald's Marxism, which he adopted as early as the age of fifteen, was personal rather than political. I should make plain how I am using these words. Everyone's politics obviously have a private element, wherein we work out our values for ourselves. But we also expect "normal" political life to involve a measure of activity with others. This means joining with kindred spirits to

promote a candidate, a cause, a philosophy. If a person never does that at all, then his ideology is likely to be purely a personal matter and should not be called political. And in all his dealings with his own countrymen, that seems the case with Oswald's Marxism. In ideology as in other things, he was at heart a loner. His decision to defect is still something of an enigma. It was not an impulsive act: in the Marines he had been teaching himself Russian. Yet once there, so far as we can tell, he did not attend classes or seek formal affiliations. There is no sign, certainly, that his Marxism grew measurably more sophisticated over that thirty-three month period.

Every community has people whose politics are only in their heads. Most are harmless, confining themselves to writing lengthy letters and boring the ears off strangers. They tend to be neither very bright nor notably stable, nor have they been singularly successful in life. But what can be said of this group is that it seems to provide more than its share of presidential assassins.

While all our successful assassins have

been identified with political positions, in all cases it has been what I have been calling a "personal politics." Leon Czolgosz, who shot McKinley at a Buffalo receiving line, is usually referred to as an "anarchist." Yet he had only the most fleeting of contact with the then-flourishing world of anarchist associations. For him it was mainly a private ideology that kept festering in his head. This was also true of Charles Guiteau, the so-called "disappointed office-seeker" who gunned down Garfield at a Washington railroad station. While he was undoubtedly unbalanced, what drove him was less his failure to receive an appointment than Garfield's unwillingness to accept his detailed political advice. Guiteau saw himself as having custody of true Republican principles, which the president was cynically abandoning.

John Wilkes Booth spent the entire Civil War in the North, watching his career decline as styles of acting changed. While his sympathies always lay with the South, he was sufficiently mercurial about them to avoid real trouble with the Union authorities. Booth did not act alone, for others supported him in his project. Even so, his decision to kill Lincoln was the personal act of a romantic. A truly "political" assassination would have come, say, from a group of former Confederate colonels.

Lee Harvey Oswald's Marxism had much in common with the murmurings of Czolgosz, Guiteau, and Booth. In the earlier cases, it was an anger building up inside, to be released through one symbolic act. In the weaving of Oswald's personal dialectic may lie a clue to what happened at the window of the Texas Book Depository. Of all the explanations, not the least outlandish would be that inner voices told him that Castro wanted Kennedy killed. This is not an occasion for considering whether an act can be "political" if it stems from a hallucination. But whatever the answer to that, it is only half an answer. There remains the riddle of whether Oswald could have done it all alone. Whether one opts for his innocence or having had assistance, the fact is that almost fifteen years of detective work have failed to come up with another possible participant. And until that comes about, I doubt we will have books much more revealing than *Legend*. □

The New York Review